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AUTHOR McLaughlin, Margaret A.

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ABSTRACT

In American schools today there are a number of legacies from historical and cultural traditions. Writing construction in United States elementary schools was primarily in penmanship even into the first decades of the 20th century. Composition courses were introduced into the college curriculum during the late 1800s when a required freshman composition course was implemented by Harvard University. To this day, it is still the custom to teach reading and writing in separate classes. Students are constrained to write in the Western and masculine Aristotelian form of discourse, conditioned to think in terms of authority, hierarchy, and binary oppositions. Good writing, for example, means writing like a White Anglo-Saxon man. In the United States, literacy education has always been used to shape the values and beliefs needed by prevailing cultural and political forces. Tracking in language instruction programs students for social and economical hierarchies. Literacy instruction attempts to exclude all other discourses with different grounds for the production and organization of knowledge, resulting in far too many students having their voices fragmented or silenced. Ethical educators cannot perpetuate a curriculum which reflects the ideology of only the socially and economically privileged. Skills, drills, multiple choice questions, and formulaic writing patterns fail to reflect the various and evolving purposes for literacy needed for the 21st century. Students must not be denied access to varying points of view. (The Code of Ethics of the Educational Professional is appended; contains nine references.) CR)

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Margaret A. McLaughlin

ETHICAL ISSUES IN LITERACY EDUCATION
A Historical Perspective

> Teaching. . . has an ethical dimension, for the teacher has the capacity to help or harm others. (Cahn 11)

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If we listen to the rhetoric of politicians and journalists, ethical behavior is measured in terms of accountability to the American taxpayers, who deserve "their money's worth." In the classroom, this notion of accountability translates to skills oriented expectations: ethical teachers are those who produce students proficient in the basic skills of readin', writin', and 'rithmetic and who know the body of information needed to function productively as employees and citizens. Within this context, students are perceived only as vessels to be filled (Freire) or consumers of a body of content or skills (Giroux). Pedagogical approaches that place students rather than curriculum or prospective employers in the center of the classroom are thus condemned as unethical. To use only one example, syndicated columnist George Will has recently accused educators of "academic malpractice" when they apply the knowledge from recent literacy research, theory, and scholarship in their classrooms. Will harangues his readers with his belief that the new pedagogical methods "damage" students and cause "subtraction from the national literacy."

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Most professions have a written statement of ethics for their members. Physicians, for example, must take the Hippocratic Oath, a code of medical ethics dating back to ancient Greece, before they can begin practicing medicine. Recently, modern technology and medical research have given physicians the

ability both to create life and to prolong life, but this new knowledge has aroused much controversy about the ethics of using such knowledge. The Hippocratic Oath entrusts the welfare of the patient to the physician, but which course of action will ultimately lead to the patient's welfare often depends on the knowledge and training of the attending physician.

Unlike physicians, educators do not take an oath before entering the profession. Consequently, many may not know The Code of Ethics of the Education Profession, which was adopted in 1975 by the Education Association Representative Assembly. Among a number of other commitments, the educator is obligated to make a "reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning," and "not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning or deny the student access to varying points of view" (See Appendix I).

Just as there has been much research leading to new medical knowledge since Hippocrates' day, so has there also been a great deal of recent research in literacy education which has given us new knowledge about how people learn to read and to write. Contemporary language scholarship, theory, and research have informed us of methods to help everyone of at least average intelligence become literate, yet there seems to be as much public controversy about the implementation of this new knowledge in our classrooms as there is about the use of the new medical technologies.

Is it possible that the new pedagogies could be more damaging than the traditional ones? A recent Department of

Education survey reveals a country with more than 409 million illiterate or barely literate adults--despite more than a century of compulsory education (Sagan and Druyan 4). The "malpractice" charges leveled against contemporary literacy educators by Will and other proponents of "back to basics" pedagogies can and should be refuted through understanding how and why traditional literacy pedagogies evolved and how traditional curricula have affected many of our students.

Even the most cursory review of literacy instruction in the Western world reveals that its major purpose has been the transmission and reproduction of the values and needs of the Church and/or the ruling elite (Applebee, Clifford, Herzberg). Before the invention of the printing press, for example, reading and writing were irrevocably linked because men had to copy texts in order for other men to have books to read. But when reading came under the jurisdiction of the Church during the Middle Ages, reading and writing began to be taught separately. Until the Reformation, the Church enforced prohibitions against scribes teaching reading and schoolmasters teaching writing because writing was considered necessary only for such worldly concerns as business and personal communication (Clifford 40). Divine revelation and tradition were believed the only valid sources of knowledge. In the seventeenth century when the scientific and philosophical revolutions challenged the established sources of knowledge, the schools held on as long as they could to the old ideas. The curriculum changed only when social and political revolutions shifted the balance of power (Herzberg 97).

In the United States, literacy education has always been

used to shape the values and beliefs needed by prevailing cultural and political forces. The colonial primers and the McGuffey readers contained moral and patriotic messages which students memorized and recited. Reading meant only the ability to pronounce words aloud. In the schools, children were first drilled on the names of letters, then on syllables of the alphabet, and finally on whole words. Because reading was perceived as a type of oral performance, comprehension was not emphasized. The major purpose of reading instruction was to transmit values, and, therefore, the predominant pedagogical approach was necessarily rote-learning, drill, and memorization (Bogdan and Straw 22-26).

By the middle 1800's, however, the United States was becoming an industrialized society. An industrialized society needed citizens who could do more than memorize; an industrialized society needed workers who could read instructions well enough to follow directions. Reading thus came to be viewed as a kind of puzzle to which there was only one right answer. The skills and subskills for the decoding of print became the focus of reading instruction. Standardized, objective tests were devised to measure students' ability to translate text into the "right" answers. These methods of teaching and testing reading are still prevalent in many schools today despite the fact that we now know there is really no way to read except in terms of one's own personal background.

Writing instruction in American elementary schools was primarily in penmanship even into the first decades of the 20th

century because "the common man" needed only to write legibly for business purposes and personal correspondence. In the high schools, analysis of sentences, diagraming, paradigms, and error correction were taught in a course called English grammar. Teaching rules and their practical application was an attempt to regularize the English language and involved a shift "from teaching a foreign language--usually Greek or Latin-- to correcting a native one." (Applebee 6-7) This prescriptive tradition of correcting "errors" continues to be the predominant approach to writing instruction in many of our classrooms even today despite the argument of linguists and psycholinguists that "Many prescriptive rules of grammar are just plain dumb and should be deleted from the usage handbooks" (Pinker 400).

Composition courses were introduced into the college curriculum during the late 1800's when a required freshman composition course was implemented by Harvard University. It soon became the most consistently required course in the American curriculum, but teaching this course was considered "intellectually second-class" by professors who had prepared themselves to teach literature (Rose 342). University English departments quickly became divided between those who taught the "higher" discipline of literature and the "lower" courses in writing. The study of literature was reserved for intellectually and/or socially privileged students. In other words, reading, writing, and literature have historically carried different social statuses (Clifford 38-41).

In our schools today there are a number of legacies from these historical and cultural traditions that remain with us. One

is the custom of teaching reading and writing in separate classes. Although we know that listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities develop concurrently and interrelatedly, integrated language instruction is still rare in our classrooms. Another example of a tradition we can't seem to shake is the notion that there is only one correct way for students to write: good writing means writing like a white Anglo-Saxon man. Linear prose structured by a thesis and topic sentences has long been the preferred organizational format for academic discourse; this model can be traced to Aristotle's paradigms for effective rhetoric. The conventions of Aristotelian discourse are essentially Western and masculine: the assertive thesis statement and the logical arrangement of concrete evidence is, in fact, a specific way of asserting that the world is best understood in this way. When students are constrained to express themselves in only this one prescribed format, they are being conditioned to think in terms of authority, hierarchy, and binary oppositions.

Another example of how language instruction continues to program students for social and economic hierarchies is evident in the tracking of students. The higher tracks, such as high school Advanced Placement courses and college honors classes, encourage behaviors required for professional careers--to think critically, to analyze, to ask questions, and to form one's own opinion by discussing and examining the issues. The lower tracks, such as remedial classes, emphasize the functional and social skills needed for jobs rather than careers: following instructions and directions, never questioning authority figures

such as texts and teachers, and preparing for standardized exams.

In remedial reading classes, the focus is all too often on the multiple choice questions and word recognition skills that were used in last century to prepare workers to follow directions instead of on reading widely in various genres and discussing conflicting ideas. Similarly, in remedial writing classes, the emphasis generally remains on language correctness, a holdover from the time this country was trying to regularize a native language for a "melting pot" young nation. Another focus is on teaching formulaic writing patterns derived from Aristotelian rhetoric that indoctrinate students into a "fill-in-the blank" mentality.

Literacy instruction in our country has traditionally had as its predominant purpose the production of the type of citizens the government has needed--first, through the transmission of a national ideology, then through mastery of decoding and transcribing skills necessary for workers to perform successfully on the job, and always through the notion of an elite literary canon which carries the assumption that cultural literacy will provide a means of entry into the ranks of the affluent society. The dominant approaches to language instruction have functioned to police language, to reproduce a dominant White Anglo Saxon masculinist culture, and to deny the contradictory voices that inform how students produce and challenge the meanings that constitute their lives. Literacy instruction in our country has also attempted to exclude all other discourses which try to establish different grounds for the production and organization of knowledge--and, thus, far too many of our students continue to

have their voices fragmented or silenced rather than welcomed.

As ethical educators, we cannot permit ourselves to perpetuate a curriculum which reflects the ideology of only the socially and economically privileged. Even as the traditional curriculum in the seventeenth century was a "means of keeping the scientifically minded out of power" (Herzberg 97), the traditional curriculum today effectively keeps those who are marginalized by race, gender, national origin, social background, and sexual orientation out of power.

Skills, drills, multiple choice questions, and formulaic writing patterns-- the "basics"-- fail to reflect the various and evolving purposes for literacy our students and our nation need for the twenty-first century. If we are to be ethical educators, we must use all available professional knowledge to "make a reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful for learning," and we cannot "deny the student access to varying points of view." We must also frequently remind ourselves that accuntability means being responsible not only to the students but also to ourselves, which means using the most effective methods of literacy education available to us. Only then will both students and taxpayers truly get their "money's worth." As professional, ethical educatiors, we must trust our training and our knowledge despite what we read and hear from conservatives who want to retain traditional values and customs which never did and never will serve the purposes of a democratic, multicultural nation.

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CODE OF ETHICS OF THE EDUCATION PROFESSION
Adopted by the 1975 National Education Association
Representative Assembly

Preamble

The educator, believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, recognizes the supreme importance of the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, and the nurture of democratic principles. Essential to these goals is the protection of freedom to learn and to teach and the guarantee of equal educational opportunity for all. The educator accepts the responsibility to adhere to the highest ethical standards.

The educator recognizes the magnitude of the responsibility inherent in the teaching process. The desire for the respect and confidence of one's colleagues, of students of parents, and of the members of the community provides the incentive to attain and maintain the highest possible degree of ethical conduct. The Code of Ethics of the Education Profession indicates the aspiration of all educators and provides the standards by which to judge conduct. . . .

PRINCIPLE I

Commitment to the Student

The educator strives to help each student realize his or her potential as a worthy and effective member of society. The educator therefore works to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals.

In fulfillment of the obligation to the student, the educator--

1. Shall not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning.

2. Shall not unreasonably deny the student access to varying points of view.

3. Shall not deliberately suppress or distort subject matter relevant to the student's progress.

4. Shall make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or to health and safety.

5. Shall not intentionally expose the student to embarrassment or disparagement.

6. Shall not on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, national origin, marital status, political or religious beliefs, family, social or cultural background, or sexual orientation, unfairly:

a. Exclude any student from participation in any program.
b. Deny benefits to any student.
c. Grant any advantage to any student.

7. Shall not use professional relationships with students for private advantage.

8. Shall not disclose information about students obtained in the course of professional service, unless disclosure serves a compelling professional purpose or is required by law.

PRINCIPLE II

Commitment to the Profession

The education profession is vested by the public with a trust and responsibility requiring the highest ideals of professional service.

In the belief that the quality of the services of the education profession directly influences the nation and its citizens, the educator shall exert every effort to raise professional standards, to promote a climate that encourages the exercise of professional judgment to achieve conditions which attract persons worthy of the trust to careers in education and to assist in preventing the practice of the profession by unqualified persons.

In fulfillment of the obligations to the profession, the educator--

1. Shall not in an application for a professional position deliberately make a false statement or fail to disclose a material fact related to competency and qualifications.

2. Shall not misrepresent his/her professional qualifications.

3. Shall not assist entry into the profession of a person known to be unqualified in respect to character, education, or other relevant attribute.

4. Shall not knowingly make a false statement concerning the qualifications of a candidate for a professional position.

5. Shall not assist a noneducator in the unauthorized practice of teaching

6. Shall not disclose information about colleagues obtained in the course of professional service unless disclosure serves a compelling professional purpose or is required by law.

7. Shall not knowingly make false or malicious statements about a colleague.

8. Shall not disclose information about students obtained in the course of professional service, unless disclosure serves a compelling professional purpose or is required by law.